

# VU Research Portal

## Teaching as a collaborative activity: an activity theoretical approach to the innovation of teaching

van Oers, B.

### ***published in***

Mind, Culture and Activity  
2005

### ***DOI (link to publisher)***

[10.1207/s15327884mca1202\\_9](https://doi.org/10.1207/s15327884mca1202_9)

### ***document version***

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

[Link to publication in VU Research Portal](#)

### ***citation for published version (APA)***

van Oers, B. (2005). Teaching as a collaborative activity: an activity theoretical approach to the innovation of teaching. *Mind, Culture and Activity*, 12(2), 165-167. [https://doi.org/10.1207/s15327884mca1202\\_9](https://doi.org/10.1207/s15327884mca1202_9)

### **General rights**

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the public portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the public portal ?

### **Take down policy**

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

### **E-mail address:**

[vuresearchportal.ub@vu.nl](mailto:vuresearchportal.ub@vu.nl)

This article was downloaded by: [Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam]

On: 13 June 2011

Access details: Access Details: [subscription number 932819707]

Publisher Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



## Mind, Culture, and Activity

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title~content=t775653674>

### BOOK REVIEW: Teaching as a Collaborative Activity: An Activity Theoretical Contribution to the Innovation of Teaching

Bert van Oers

Online publication date: 17 November 2009

**To cite this Article** van Oers, Bert(2005) 'BOOK REVIEW: Teaching as a Collaborative Activity: An Activity Theoretical Contribution to the Innovation of Teaching', *Mind, Culture, and Activity*, 12: 2, 165 — 167

**To link to this Article:** DOI: 10.1207/s15327884mca1202\_9

**URL:** [http://dx.doi.org/10.1207/s15327884mca1202\\_9](http://dx.doi.org/10.1207/s15327884mca1202_9)

## PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Full terms and conditions of use: <http://www.informaworld.com/terms-and-conditions-of-access.pdf>

This article may be used for research, teaching and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, re-distribution, re-selling, loan or sub-licensing, systematic supply or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The accuracy of any instructions, formulae and drug doses should be independently verified with primary sources. The publisher shall not be liable for any loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.

## Teaching as a Collaborative Activity: An Activity Theoretical Contribution to the Innovation of Teaching

**Teaching Transformed. Achieving Excellence, Fairness, Inclusion, and Harmony**, by Roland G. Tharp, Peggy Estrada, Stephanie Stoll Dalton, and Lois A. Yamauchi, Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2000, 274 pp., \$33.00 (paper).

Reviewed by  
Bert van Oers  
*Free University Amsterdam*

An overwhelming mass of studies can be cited to show that schooling is a decisive factor in cognitive development and identity formation, in the distribution of cultural capital and power, as well as in the innovation of culture. It has become clear that the way the teacher organizes classroom activities is crucial for the empowerment of the pupils. With their volume, *Teaching Transformed*, Tharp and his colleagues elaborate previous work (Tharp & Gallimore, 1988), and offer new ideas for the debate about the organization of school learning.

Tharp and his team have been studying this issue for years from a Vygotskian perspective. They view “teaching” as largely a language-based collaborative process that is closely related to meaningful activities in a community. This constitutes a major theoretical basis of their work. In their view, schools can implement this point of view in classrooms by setting up activity settings in which students can collaborate for achieving the educational goals. Tharp and his team have recently added a new dimension to this theory of teaching through activity settings, claiming that classroom teaching must be radically transformed from a model of transmission-based teaching to one which promotes learning in an inclusive community. In their volume, *Teaching Transformed*, they give a thought-provoking overview of their argument and present a theory-driven plan for how to transform classroom teaching. But the question remains: how convincing is their approach?

In their view, the transformation of teaching should start out with a redefinition of the basic values of schooling. Most schools aim at *Excellence* in their pupils, but according to Tharp et al., this easily winds up reproducing cultural inequality. Schools that want to innovate teaching should also accept responsibility for achieving *Fairness* in the distribution of cultural capital, for guaranteeing *Inclusion* of all pupils in one community of learners, and for *Harmony* with regard to the common values and norms that are subscribed by their community. Tharp and his colleagues develop a teaching approach in this volume that claims achieving excellence in pupils in a fair, inclusive, and harmonious way.

What does it mean for the classroom? The authors’ ideal classroom consists of teachers and pupils engaged in a joint productive activity where all pupils have a share in the negotiations of meanings that are brought in by pupils and the teacher regarding the content theme at hand. But the authors are also aware of the potential dangers of the situation. Every classroom activity has an

in-built tendency of sorting pupils into groups on the basis of performance levels or interests. Any proposal of a new teaching plan should take great pains to break this so-called “great cycle of social sorting” to realize the ideals of inclusion and harmony.

But the transformation of teaching cannot be achieved by just defining basic values and aims. The ideal form of transformed teaching observes five standards:

1. Joint productive activity: Teachers and pupils are involved in a joint activity that produces certain outcomes.
2. Language and literacy development across the curriculum: All activities and subactivities are seen as opportunities to develop the (written) language abilities of the pupils.
3. Contextualization: The teacher should connect the meanings proposed in the subject matter with the personal meanings of the pupils’ everyday life.
4. Teaching complex thinking: The teacher should organize the activity in such a way that multiple perspectives and solutions can interact and can be addressed in one and the same project.
5. Instructional conversation: The progress of understanding must be based on guided classroom conversations and dialogues.

The transformation of teaching is a process of appropriating the attitudes and abilities for teaching according to these standards. However, the authors explain that this transformation is not an easy matter. First of all, multiple, diversified, but mutually related, activity settings must be organized simultaneously in the classroom on the basis of a consistent set of values. This diversification of activity settings in the classroom is important, according to Tharp et al., as it gives pupils the opportunity to experience different power relationships, different roles, different language codes, and different cultural values (collectivism or individualism).

The transformation of a traditional teaching style toward teaching according to the mentioned standards and ideals (e.g., excellence, fairness, inclusion, harmony) is a difficult job that calls for assistance. Therefore, Tharp and his colleagues describe a five-stage learning process that brings the teachers to this transformed way of teaching. Step by step, the teachers learn to organize the conditions for their teaching in their classroom (e.g., creating a community of learners, working with multiple activity settings), and appropriate the abilities of teaching according to the five standards.

However, given the complexity of this transformation, one may seriously wonder if teachers are really able to invest all the energy required for this innovation. Tharp et al. do not give detailed empirical evidence about the attainability of this transformed teaching. Interestingly, Tharp et al. refer to some Dutch schools as supporting evidence: “The most fully realized Phase 5 schools known to us are two in the Netherlands developed schools...” (p. 225). The authors mention that those schools serve a multiethnic, multilingual population, where “instructional activities are creatively integrated with community and even business organizations” (p. 225). These schools appropriated the concept of “developmental education” (based on Vygotsky’s cultural historical theory of human development) for their classroom practices (see van Oers, 2003). Despite the commonalities between Tharp’s schools and these Dutch schools, there are also points of diversion that can be presented here as critical remarks on the proposal of Tharp et al. I mention just two of them.

To begin with, Tharp’s stage theory of teacher learning seems to be based on a dissection of the ideal form of teaching into different elements. The different elements can be programmed consec-

utively in stages of the teachers' curriculum. It seems to me, however, that the Vygotskian view is against this kind of analytic definition of elements. In Vygotsky's view, we have to start from the unit of analysis that still represents the characteristics of the totality (van der Veer & Valsiner, 1991, pp. 165–167). My colleagues and I used this holistic idea of Vygotsky as a starting point for the in-service teacher education and decided to always take this ideal form of teaching as a starting point. In instances where the teacher cannot manage all points at a time (which is often the case), the teacher trainer takes charge for these elements in the assisted teaching activity (like a teacher does when working in the pupils' zone of proximal development). This establishes a setup for teacher education that is completely different from the one advocated by Tharp and his colleagues. In our view, the contents of Tharp's different stages are always necessary elements for teaching, although they are not always in the hands of the teacher. Whereas the Dutch view benefits maximally from the distributed character of the teachers' cognition, Tharp's approach seems to be based on an analytic view that leads to teacher education following an assembly line model. In our view, this reduces the empowerment of teachers with regard to their teaching. Moreover, Tharp's time scale is absolutely insufficient (unreasonably short) for the achievement of these high-reaching goals. In our in-service work, the teacher education program often takes 1 or 2 years of collaborative classroom work between the teacher, his or her colleagues, and the teacher trainer.

The second comment I would like to make from a "developmental education" perspective is related to Tharp's model of classroom management. Tharp et al. seem to focus too exclusively on the organizational aspects of classroom management. It is striking that no attention is given to subject matters and how teachers translate these into specific object-oriented activities. Part of the organization of classroom activities is directly related to the teacher's view on the subject matter. A teacher who views (for example) mathematics as a procedural activity mechanically applied to numbers will teach differently from a teacher who conceives of mathematics as a problem-solving activity. I suggest it is impossible to organize an instructional conversation without due attention to the subject matter and its translation into the activities and dialogues embedded in those activities. In our assistance of the teachers' attempts at appropriating the developmental teaching activity, there is ample attention to the subject matters, their rules, tools, and methods. Tharp's approach is seriously limited by this conception of teaching as primarily an organizational process that undervalues the importance of subject matter conceptions.

Nevertheless, Tharp and his colleagues have written a wonderful and stimulating book. The book is definitely thought provoking, and must be read by everyone interested in a "Vygotskian style of teaching." The ideas are magnificent, but the strategies for implementing them in practice need further debate.

## REFERENCES

- Tharp, R. G., & Gallimore, R. (1988). *Rousing minds to life. Teaching, learning, and schooling in a social context*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Van der Veer, R., & Valsiner, J. (1991). *Understanding Vygotsky. A quest for synthesis*. Oxford, England: Blackwell.
- Van Oers, B. (Ed.). (2003). *Narratives of childhood*. Amsterdam: VU press.